



To Soften the Rocks

Recently my hubby and I took our camper for its maiden voyage. By slow road, the one with all the square corners and twists and turns, our little caravan made its way towards the rock country. It's the kind of road that encourages you to pause and look, because you cannot possibly be in a hurry if you are driving that route. Especially in the fall, I do so love the rock country of northeastern Minnesota. The changing of the colors is tough to beat where the woods meets the water.

When the kids were young, we were die-hard tent campers, loving best the trips that took us by boat into the rock country. We camped on islands, neighbors not too near. We scrabbled over those rocks collecting blueberries. We scrabbled over the rocks seeking safe swimming spots, to take a break on warm summer days. Many fall trips, I've scrabbled over the rocks carrying a canoe, mostly with my Mom, making our way into the Boundary Waters.

The man and I were a little worried about what this latest move into camping with hard sides might mean for us. Like a horse I once owned, my husband likes to say that our bubble is a little big. We don't take well to crowding. And this new camping gear is made to stay on the smooth roads, where you tend to find more folks hanging about. My spouse would like to continue our island camping, happy with the places that it took us. The problem is, as I age I am increasingly drawn to a bed, and not so given to lying on the ground. It's harder to get up than it used to be, and it takes longer in the morning for the creaks to get worked out. I like the idea of a comfortable bed to soften the rocks.

But as I had thought from earlier travels, we found that in the fall there are Forest Service campgrounds fairly empty of people, and even those of us with a big bubble can find a quiet place in which to set up. We still spent time in the boat, effortlessly touring the shoreline the motorized way. We watched the glow of the campfire, that sweet smell of jack pine permeating everything I own. I sat on a rock one morning while the crew was out fishing, watching the warblers working the alders along the shoreline. Without my bird book in hand, I haven't a clue who's who in their confusing fall colors. It was strikingly beautiful to watch a fog come in unexpectedly. Breakfast was punctuated when one of the dogs decided he really must retrieve a milk jug someone had tied out in the water, marking a rock hazardous to boating. Round and round in circles that goofy dog swam, until his master was forced to take the boat out to retrieve him. Through it all, there was a kind of quiet that we really enjoy.

I recently watched a National Park Service webinar on the effects of noise on wildlife. Recent research has focused on global increases in environmental noise levels which come from expansion of human populations, transportation networks, and resource extraction. In a synthesis of 20 years of research, 82% of the studies report significant responses to noise in marine and terrestrial environments amongst mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. Effects of noise include decline in breeding productivity, reduced fitness, change in time of settlement, change in predator-prey interactions, change in pollination and seed dispersal, altered behaviors, and reduced habitat quality.

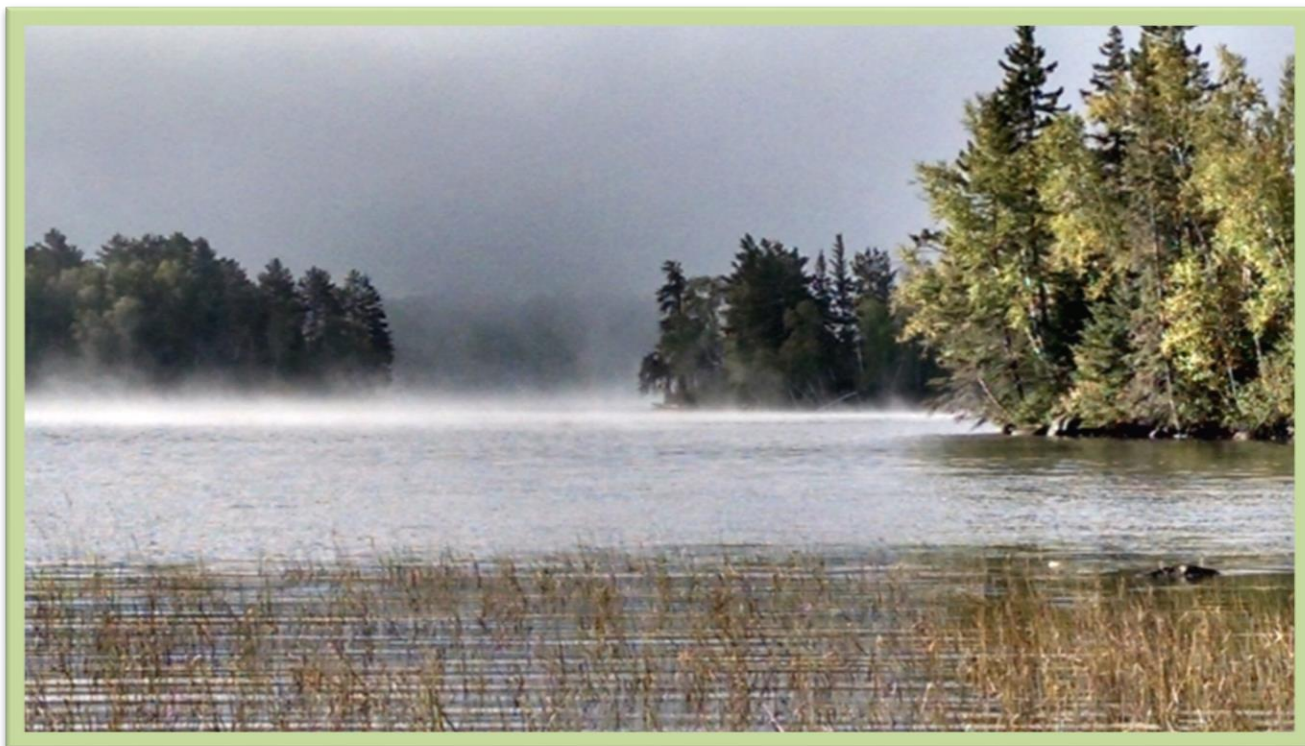
For me, it was especially interesting when comparisons were made between noise levels that affect terrestrial wildlife, and noise levels at which a high percentage of human communities were highly annoyed. Not surprisingly, animals are more sensitive to noise than are people. But people are not immune to excessive noise.

What do you think? Do people need the quiet?

Recently, we had a Youth Conservation Corp student on the Chippewa National Forest from New York City. She shared with us that this was the first time in her life she was surrounded by nature. "I know what silence sounds like, I know what stars look like, and I never knew what beautiful sounds the wind blowing through the leaves of trees could make...I cannot put into words how powerful and moving the experience was. It changed me. This trip has set in stone for me that I need to be outdoors." This young lady reminded us of just how powerful the quiet landscapes of our National Forests can be in our lives.

I think when I retire that my tiny, portable house is going to get parked for a few weeks in the fall in the campgrounds that dot the rock country. I like the idea of a mobile base camp from which I can poke around, exploring shorelines in my smallest canoe. Nothing more pressing than to learn some unfamiliar plants, chase a few lichens with a camera, perhaps cast out a fishing line. In the meantime, there's got to be some way to carve out a little time from this fall's calendar to park that comfy bedroom on the Chippewa, where the sandy beaches will caress the bottom of the boat, and we can study the night sky to see in what ways the moon has changed.

There's nothing quite like watching the fog roll in from out of nowhere, eating up the islands until they disappear. To hear the rustle of the leaves, broken only by the chatter of a red squirrel, call of a barred owl, or the tiny movements of the warblers along a shoreline. These are the sights and sounds that quiet the mind and comfort the soul. When you find these connections, you, too will know you are home.



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